

The life & Letters of James Gates Percival. by Julius H. Ward. (1)
Boston, Ticknor & Fields. 1861. 12mo. pp XIV 583.

This is an interesting & in many respects instructive book. Mr Ward has done his work, as is fitting, in a loving spirit, & if he overestimates both what Percival was & what he did, he enables us to form our own judgment by letting him so far as possible speak for himself. The book gives a rather curious picture of what the life of a man of letters is likely to be in a country not yet ripe for literary production, especially if ~~he~~ ^{the} he be not endowed with ~~these~~ ^{the} higher qualities which command respect, & can wait for that ~~highest~~ ^{best} of all successes which comes slowly. In a generation where everybody can write verses & where certain modes of thought & turns ^{of phrase} have become so tyrannous that it is as hard to distinguish between the productions of one minor poet & another as ~~also~~ among those of so many Minnesingers or Troubadours, there is a demand for only two things, - for what chimes with the moment's whim of popular sentiment & is forgotten when that has changed, or for ~~that~~ ^{what} which is never an anachronism because it satisfies ^{the} the eternal thirst of our nature for ^{then} ideal waters that glimmer before us & still before us in ever-renewing mirage. Percival met neither of these conditions. With a nature singularly unpliant, & unsympathetic, & self-involved, he was incapable of receiving into his own mind the ordinary emotions of men & giving them back in music, & with a lofty conception of the object & purposes of poetry, he had neither the resolution nor the power which might have enabled him to realize it. He offers as striking an example as we know of the poetic temperament unbalanced with those less obvious qualities which make the poetic faculty. His verse carries every inch of canvas that diction & sentiment can crowd, but the craft is cowardly & we miss that deep-grasping keel of reason which alone can steady & give direction. His mind drifts, it does not answer the helm, & in his longer poems, like "Prometheus", half the voyage is spent in ^{trying to} making up for a leeway which becomes at last irretrievable. If he had a port in view when he set out, he seems soon to give up all hope of ever reaching it, & whenever we open the logbook we find him running for nowhere in particular, as the ~~very~~ ^{wind} happens to ~~lead~~ ^{lead}, or to ~~blow~~ ^{blow} in the merest call of windy verbiage. The truth is that Percival was led to the writing of verse by ^{a sentimental} desire of the mind, & not by that answering instinct of all the faculties which is a self-forgetting passion of the entire man. Too excitable to possess his subject fully as a man of more talent may often do, he is not possessed by it as the man of genius is, & seems helplessly ^{striving} ~~unable~~ the greater part of the time to make out what, in the name of Common or uncommon sense, ^{he is after} with all the stock properties of verse whirling & dancing about his ears puffed out with an empty show of life, the reader of much of his blank verse feels as if a mob of well-dressed

clotheslines were rioting about him in all the unwillling ecstasy of a thunderstorm. (C)

Percival, living from 1795 to 1866, ^{arrived at} ~~came to~~ manhood just as the last

was with England had come to an end. Poor, shy, & proud, there is nothing in his earlier ^{years} ~~life~~ that might not be paralleled in thousands of hundreds of sensitive boys who gradually get the rounds shaken out of them in the rough school of ^{the} ~~the~~ world. The length of the schooling needful in his case is what makes it peculiar. Not till after he was fifty, if even then, did he learn that the world never takes a man at his own valuation & never pays money for what it does not want, or think it wants. It did not want his poetry simply because it was not, it is not, & by no conceivable power of argument ^{can} be made, interesting, — the first duty of every artistic product. Percival, who would have ^{thought} his neighbors mad if they had insisted on his buying twenty thousand ^{refrigerators} ~~warmers~~ merely because they had been at the trouble of making them & found it convenient to turn them into cash, could never forgive the world for this business view of the matter. He went on doggedly making refrigerators of every possible pattern, & comforted himself with the thought of ~~an~~ ^{wise} posterity which should have learned that the purpose of poetry is to cool & ^{not to} ~~not to~~ kindle. His "Mind", which is on the whole perhaps the best of his writings, rises in coldness with his brother doctor, Akenside, whose "Pleasures of Imagination" are something quite other than that in reality. If there be here & there a semblance of pale fire, it is but the reflection of moonshine upon ice. Akenside is respectable because he really had something ~~new~~ new to say in spite of his pompous, mouthing, way of saying it, but when Percival says it over again it is a little too much. In his more ambitious pieces, — & it is curious how literally the word "pieces" applies to all he did, — he devotes himself mainly to telling us what poetry ought to be, as if mankind were not always more than satisfied with any one who fulfills the true office of poet by showing them what it is, with the least possible fuss. Percival was a professor of poetry rather than a poet, & we are not surprised at the number of lectures he reads us when we learn that in early life he was an excellent demonstrator of anatomy whose subject must be had before his interest in it begins. His interest in poetry was always more or less scientific. He was forever trying experiments in matter & form, especially the latter. And these were especially unhappy, because it is plain that he had no musical ear, or at best a very imperfect one. His attempts at classical meters are simply unreadable. He contrives to make even the Sapphic so, which when we read it in Latin moves faithfully to our modern accentuation. Let any one who wishes to feel the difference between East & no ear compare Percival's specimens with those in the same kind of Coleridge who had the finest metrical sense since Milton. We take this very experimenting to be a sufficient proof that Percival's faculty, such as it was, & we do not rate it highly, was artificial & not innate. The true poet is much rather experimented upon by life & nature, by joy & sorrow, by beauty & defect, till it be found out whether he have any hidden music in the him that can sing them into an accord with the eternal harmony which we call God.

It is easy to trace the literary influences to which the mind of Percival was in turn subjected. Early in life we find ^{traces} of Byronism, which indeed does not wholly disappear to the last. There is among his poems "An Imprecation", of which a single stanza will suffice as a specimen.

"Wrapped in sheets of gory lightning,
While cursed night-hags ring thy knell,
May the arm of vengeance bright'ning,
O'er the wave the sword of Hell!"

If we could fancy Laura Matilda shut up tipsy in the watchhouse, we might suppose her capable of this melodious substitute for swearing. We confess ^{that} we cannot read it without laughing, after learning from Mr Ward that its Salmonian Thunderbolts were launched at the Comfortable little city of Hartford, because the poet fancied that the inhabitants thereof did not like him as his verses so much as he ^{himself} did. There is something deliciously ludicrous in the conception of night-hags ringing the orthodox bells of the Second Congregational or First Baptist meetinghouse to summon the parishioners to witness these fatal consequences of not reading Percival's poems. Nothing short less than the fear of some such catastrophe could compel the personal of the greater part of them. Next to Byron comes Moore whose cloying sentimentalism & too facile melody are recalled by the subject & treatment of very many of the shorter lyrics of Percival. In "Promethues" it is Shelley who is paramount for the time, & Shelley at his worst period, before his ^{unwieldy} ~~astounding~~ abundance of incoherent words & images, that were merely words & images without any meaning of ^{real} experience to give them solidity, had been compressed in the stricter moulds of thought & study. In the blank verse again we encounter Wordsworth's tone & sentiment. There were no good models for Percival who always improvised & who seems to have thought worse the great distinction between poetry & prose. Percival got nothing from Shelley but ^{the} fatal capriciousness which is his vice, nothing from Wordsworth but that tendency to preach ^{at every corner} about a sympathy with nature which is not his real distinction, & which becomes a wearisome cant at secondhand. Shelley & Wordsworth are both stilted, though in different ways. Shelley wreathed his stilt with flowers, while Wordsworth, protesting against the use of them as sinful, mounts ^{high} them solemnly at last & ^{consistently} ~~stalled away~~ ^{eschewing} ~~with nothing to~~ ^{ad only} that were scandalous, & were ^{to} ~~hide~~ the naked wood, — nay, was it not Gray's ^{after all} that were scandalous, & were not his ^{own} ~~models~~ ^{modelled} after those of the sainted Cooper, of a strictly orthodox pattern? After all? Percival, like all imitators is caught by the defects of what he copies & exaggerates them. With him the stilt is the principal chief matter, & when getting a taller pair than either of his predecessors, he ^{lifts} ~~mounts~~ his commonplace upon them only to make it more drearily conspicuous. Shelley has his gleams of unearthly wildfire, Wordsworth is ~~the most~~ by fits the most buoyant inspired man of his generation, but Percival has no lucid interval. He is pertinaciously & unappeasably dull, & never in his life

wrote a memorable verse. We should not have thought this of any consequence ^{at} now, for we need not try to read him, ~~and~~ not Mr Ward with amusing gravity all along assume that he was a great poet. There was scarce timber enough in him for the making of a Tiedge or a Stagedoor, both of whom he somewhat resembles.

Perival came to maturity at an unfortunate time for a man so liable to self-deception. Leaving Colley with a imperfect a classical training (in spite of the numerous "testimonials" addressed by Mr Ward) that he was capable of laying the accent on the second syllable of Pericles, he seems never to have systematically trained even such faculty as was in him, but to have gone on to the end mistaking quantity of brain for ^{wholesome} ~~abundance~~ of thought. The consequence, a prolonged immaturity which makes his latest volume published in 1843 as crude & as plainly wanting in enduring quality as the first number of his "Clio". The same old complaints of neglected genius, - as if Genius could ever be neglected so long as it has the personal consolation of its own ^{divine} society, - the same wild sentiment, the same feeling about for topics of verse in which he may possibly find that ^{inspiration} ~~inspiration~~ ^{from within} which the true poet cannot flee from in himself. Then tedious wailings about heavenly powers suffocating in the heavy atmosphere of an unrecog- nizing world, & Perival is proper of them, are simply an advertisement to whoever has ears of some innate disability in the man who utters them. Heavenly powers know very well how to take care of themselves. The poor "World", meaning thereby that small fraction of society which has any personal knowledge of an author or his affairs, has had great wrong done it in such matters. It is not, & never was, the powers of a man that it reflects, it cares not if it would, but his weaknesses, of which & especially the publication of them, of which it grows weary. It can never supply any man with what is wanting in himself, & the attempt to do it only makes bad worse. If a man can only find the proof of his own genius in public appreciation, still worse, if his vanity console itself with seeking that taking it as an evidence of rare qualities in himself that his fellow-mortals are unable to see them, it is all up with him. The "World" resolutely refused to find Woodworth entertaining, & I refuse still on good grounds, but the genius that was in him bore up unflinchingly, would take no denial, got its claim admitted on all hands, & impregnated at last the literature of an entire generation, though habitués in sicco, if ever genius did. But Perival seems to have satisfied himself with a syllogism something like this: men of genius are neglected: the more neglected, the more genius: I am altogether neglected, & ergo wholly made up of that priceless material. The truth was that he suffered from over- appreciation, & "when", says a nameless old Frenchman, "I see a man go up like a rocket, I expect before long to see the stick come down." The times were singularly propitious to mediocrity. It had been resolved unanimously that we must & would have a national literature. England, France, Spain, Italy, ^{each} already had their one, Ger- many was getting one made as fast as possible, & Ireland would that ^{she} ~~the~~ one had one far surpassing them all. To be respectable, we must have one also, & that speedily. That we

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we were not yet, in any true sense, a nation, that we wanted that literary & social atmosphere which is the breath of life to all artistic production, that our scholarship, such as it was, was mostly of that theological sort which acts like a prolonged bruise upon the brain, that our poetic fathers were Joel Barlow & Timothy Dwight, was nothing to the purpose, - a literature adapted to the size of the country, was what we must & would have. Given the number of square miles, the length of the rivers, & the size of the lakes, & you hear the greatness of the literature we were bound to produce without further delay. Physical Geography for the first time took her rightful place as the truth & most inspiring guide. A glance at the map would satisfy the most incredulous that she had done her best for us, & should be be worthy to the glorious opportunity? Not we indeed! So surely as Franklin invented the art of printing & Fulton the steam engine, we would invent ^{no} a great part in time to send the news by the next packet to England & teach her that we were her masters in arts as well as arms. Percival was only too ready to be invented, & he forthwith produced ^{his tale of} verses from a loom capable of turning off a hitherto unheard-of number of yards ^{to the four}, & perfectly adapted to the amplitude of our territory, inasmuch as it was manufactured on the theory of covering the largest surface with the least possible amount of meaning that would hold words together. He was as ready to accept the ^{perilous} dangerous imposition & as loud in asserting his claim thereto as Sir Kay always used to be, & with much the same result. Our critical journals (and America certainly has led the world in a department of letters which of course requires no outfit but the power to read & write gratuitously furnished by our public schools) received him with a shout of welcome. Here came the true deliverer at last, mounted on a steed to which he himself had given the new name of "Pegasus" (for we were to be original in everything), & certainly blowing his own trumpet with remarkable vigor of lungs. Solitary enthusiasts, who had long awaited this sublime avatar, addressed him in sonnets, which he accepted with a gravity beyond all praise. (To be sure, even the bard seems to ~~allow~~ ^{allow} that his sense of humor was hardly equal to his other transcendent endowments.) His path was strewn with laurel, & of the native variety, altogether superior to that of the old world & certainly not precisely like it. Verses signed "P.", & as like each other as two peas & as much like poetry as that vegetable is like a peach, were watched for in the corner of the newspaper as an astronomer watches for a new planet. There was never anything so comical ^{since} the crowning in the Capitol of Messer Francesco Petrarca, Grand Sentimentalist in Ordinary at the Court of King Robert of Naples. Unhappily Percival took it all quite seriously. There was no praise too ample for the easy elasticity of his swallow. He believed himself as gigantic as the shadow he cast on these rolling mists of insubstantial adulation, & life long he could never make out why his fine words refused to butter his parsnips for him, nay, to furnish both parsnips & sauce. While the critics were debating precisely how many of the prime qualities of the great poets of his own & preceding generations he combined in his single genius & in what particular respects he surpassed them all, a point about which he himself seems never to have had any doubts, the public, which courts read Scott & Byron with avidity & which was beginning even to taste Woodworth, found his verses inexplicably wearisome. They would not through the subscribe for a collected edition of those works which might have been too much for them. With whatever dulness of sense they may be charged, they have a remarkably keen ^{scent} ~~scent~~ for tediousness & will have none of it unless in a tract or sermon where, of course, it is to be expected. Percival never forgave the public, but it was the critics that he never should have forgiven, for of all the maggots that can make their way into the brains through the ears, there is none

(Insert). If that little dribbling ^{man} ~~man~~ ^{has} succeeded in engendering Shakespeare, what a giant might we not look for from the mighty womb of Missipipi!

1. Write out the following sentences correctly in Italian, and then translate them into English:—

Si le Fiorentini chi con tanto costanza è per tanto tempi defesero il loro liberta contro gli usurpazioni de' Medici, riuscissero in fine a sottrarvisi l' abiam vedduto. Meritarrono il loro sorte? Avremo lo coraggio di dirla? Sì, in parte almeno la merritarano.

Coloro chi in modo piu o meno colpevolo è diretto furano autore del rovina del loro patria, ottennero essi, à prezzo almeno di tanti lacrimi è di tanta sangue quell fine chi s'eran prefissa? Vediamola.

2. Give all the forms of the verb *giudicare*, marking the syllables on which the accent falls.

3. Give all the forms of the verb *porre*.

4. Give the imperative mood of *finire*.

5. Give the future tense of *ottenere*.

6. Give the forms of the perfect indicative in *are*, *ere*, and *ire*.

7. What change takes place to form the Italian perfect where the Latin has *x*, *nx*, and *v*? *Pinxi*, *vixi*, *crevi*.

8. What does the Latin *pl* become in Italian? Give some examples.

9. Decline the masculine and feminine definite articles.

Sen. MARCH 25, 1863.

so disastrous as the persuasion that you are a great poet. There is surely something
fatal in the construction of the ears of male authors which lays them specially open
to the inroads of this pest. It tickles pleasantly while it eats away the fibre of will &
incapacitates a man for all honest feeling with himself. Unhappily its insidious
titillation seems to have been Percival's one great pleasure during life.

We began by saying that the book before us was interesting
& instructive, but we meant that it was so not so much from any positive merits
of its own, as by the lesson which almost every page of it suggests. To those who
have some knowledge of the history of literature or some experience in life, it is,
from beginning to end a history of architects mistaking great desires for great powers.
If poetry, in Bacon's noble definition of it, "adapts the shows of things to the desires
of the mind", sentimentalism is equally ^{skillful} in making realities shape themselves
to the cravings of vanity. The theory that the poet is a being above the world & apart
from it is true of him as an observer only who applies to the phenomena about
him the test of a finer & more spiritual sense. That he is a creature divorced
apart from his fellowmen by a mental organization that makes them mutually
unintelligible to each other, is in flat contradiction with the lives of those ^{poets} universally
acknowledged as greatest. Dante, Shakespeare, Calderon, Milton, ~~Shelton~~
Molière, ^{Gautier} what conceivable sense is it true of them that they wanted the merely
qualities which made them equal to the demands of the world they lived in which
they lived? That a poet should aspire, as Victor Hugo used to do, that he is a reorganizer
of the moral world, & that words cunningly adapted to the popular whim of the times,
form parts of some mysterious system which is to give us a new heaven & a new earth
& remodel laws of art which are as unchangeable as those of astronomy, can do no
very great harm to any one but the author himself, who will thereby be led astray
from his proper function & from the only path of legitimate & lasting success. But
when the theory is carried a step farther & we are asked to believe, that because
as in Percival's case, that, because a man can write verses, he is exempt from
that miserable logic of life & circumstance to which all other men are subjected
& to which it is ^{wholesome} good for them that they should be, then it becomes mischievous
& calls for a protest from all those who have at heart the interests of good morals
& healthy literature. It is the theory of idlers & dilettanti, of fribbles in morals &
dilettantes in verse, which a young man of real power may dally with ^{during} some fit
of mental indigestion, but which when accepted by a mature man & carried along with
him through life is a sure mark of feebleness & of insincere dealing with himself.
Percival is a good example of a class of authors unhappily too numerous in these
latter days. To escape the natural growth of a world ill at ease with itself & still nervous
with the frightful palpitation of the French revolution, they are but feeble spirits in our
healthier air. Without faith or hope, & deprived of that outward support in the orderly & habitual
provision of events & authoritative limitations of thought which in ordinary times gives steadiness

to feeble & timid intellects, they are turned inward, & forced, like Audubon & Woodward

(7)

"To eat into themselves for lack
Of this thing to hew & hack."

Compelled to find ^{within them} ~~in their own minds~~ that stay which had hitherto been supplied by creeds & institutions, they learned to attribute to their own consciousness the grandeur which belongs of right only to the mind of the human race slowly unshowering after ^{an} ~~that~~ equilibrium between its desires & the eternal conditions of them. Hence that exaggeration of the individual & deformation of the social man which has become the cant of modern literature. Abundance of such phenomena accompanied the rise of what was called Romanticism in Germany & France, reacting to some extent even upon England & consequently America. The smaller poets erected themselves into a kind of guild into which all were admitted who gave proof of a certain feebleness of character which rendered them superior to their proper fellowmen. It was a society of triflers undertaking to teach the new generation how to walk. Meanwhile the object of their generous solicitude, what with clinging to Mother Past's skirts, & helping itself by every piece of household furniture it could lay hands on, learned, after many a tumble, to get on its legs & to use them as other generations had done before it. Perceval belonged to this new order of bards, weak in ^{the legs} ~~the hope~~ & thinking ^{into his own not inferior} ~~of~~ health exercise to climb the peaks of Dreamland. To the vague & misty ^{attainable} ~~visions~~ from those sublime humbugs, ^{his} ~~their~~ reports in blank verse & otherwise did ample justice, but failed to excite the appetite of mankind. He spent his life, like others of his class, in proclaiming himself a neglected Columbus, & was ready to start on his voyage when the public purse would supply the means of building his ships. It never seems to have entered his head that the gulf between genius & its new world is never too wide for a stout swimmer: like all sentimentalists he reversed the process of nature which makes it a part of greatness that it is a simple thing to itself, however ^{much of} ~~great~~ a marvel it may be to other men. He discovered his own genius, as he supposed, - a thing impossible had the genius been real. Donne never wrote a profounder verse than

"Who knows his virtue's name & place, hath none."

Perceval's life was by no means a remarkable one except, perhaps, in the number of chances that seem to have been offered him to have made something of himself if anything were possibly to be made. He was never without ^{new} ~~new~~ ^{without} ~~opportunities~~ friends, or opportunities that considerate kindness which many a young scholar can remember as shown to generous to himself. But nothing could help Perceval whose nature had defeat worked into its very composition. He was not a real, but an imaginary man. His early attempt at suicide (as Mr Ward seems to think it) is typical of him. He is not the first young man who, when crossed in love, has spoken of "loopin o'er a lin" - nor will he be the last. But that any one ^{who} ~~really~~ meant to kill himself should put himself resolutely in the way of being prevented, as Perceval did, is hard to believe. One remarkable gift he seems to have had, which may be called memory of the eye. What he saw, he never forgot & this fitted him for a good geological observer. How great his power of combination was, which alone could have made him an great geologist, we cannot determine. But he seems to have shown ^{but little} ~~but little~~ in other directions. At least it is noticeable that he was happy for the first time when taken away his vague pursuit of the ideal & set to practical work.